Letter from a Scottish Immigrant, c. 1920

Hallo, Mum!

It’s me, Alan! Aye, aye, and Ewan’s sitting right here next to me. But he kens I’m the better writer, don’t ye, Ewan?

Mum, I ken it’s been a while since we’ve wrote back home to ye, but things have been so hectic here with ma brother and me. Scraping the money and time together to get this to ye was not an easy task. But it’ll be well worth it for the smile on yer face! Yer laddies are making their way in the world!

The voyage to New York was almost as horrible as the docksmen said it would be. Because we couldn’t afford a second- or third-class ticket, they stuffed the rest of us, who had only steerage tickets, all down in the bottom of the boat where even the air was cheaper. I was impressed by how many Lowlanders there were; ye’d think only we Highlanders would have the gall to leave oor homeland…even with oor economy as bad as it is. They say here that America is in some kind of Roaring Twenties; seems to me like roaring only applies to the rich, but anything’s better than lying around in that old, abandoned steel factory back home!

Speaking of steel, we thought ye’d like to ken that everyone here in Pittsburgh (nae just us!) has been mourning for months over the death of one impressive Scotsman, a Mr. Andrew Carnegie. They say he came over some seventy years ago as a wee lad, and that soon enough he’d built a steel empire as muckle as half of that of England and Scotland combined! Now *that’s* a true Scotsman there, using ingenuity and hard work and a little bit of hometown steel knowledge to one’s advantage! He’s oor idol, he is. But enough about that, though, we need to tell ye about oor own happenings!

After that hellish boat docked in New York Harbor, the second- and third-class passengers were sent ahead of us. Apparently, they’d filled out all their immigration papers on the voyage while we were down here enjoying each other’s fine breath. Some first impression of equality, eh? They then shuffled out the lot of us remaining Scots onto a muckle building on this island in the middle of the harbor. I’ll spare ye the driech details, though, because we spent almost the whole time waiting in line. We were pure nervous, though, Mum. Especially when mah eejit brother here decided to breathe heavily while climbing up the stairs right as we walked in, and a man that looked half like a doctor almost decided to mark him with chalk and send him away to a detainment room. Pure scared, we were.

We got through Ellis Island fine, and left New York City that day for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (There’s nae time nor money to be wasted on spending a night somewhere we don’t plan on staying!) The others on the boat had told us there’s a great steel industry in Pittsburgh (thanks to Mr. Carnegie!) and that there’s been a muckle group of Scottish immigrants here in Pennsylvania for over a century.

On the train to Pittsburgh, when we finally had the time to be aware of oor surroundings, we could feel peoples’ stares boring into oor backs. We were still filthy from the boat, and from what little Ewan and I talked to each other they were able to glean oor accent. An awfully gallus old man told us to “take oor lazy, uncivilized arses back home.” I wanted to gie him a good one to the jaw, but the last thing I was going to do was gie America any reason to think that we weren’t going to earn oor place here. Ewan and I agree that this is the land of opportunity, at least compared to oor small village of Dunsferden we had to leave behind. Ye ken how much we love that hilly land, but after the steel factory closed down, there was just nothing left for us.

I’m sorry Mum, ye already ken all this. It’s just that it’s pure hard for Ewan and me to be so far away from home and the skirls of the bagpipes. At least some of the music here reminds us of the music back home, with the fiddle and all.

But we miss ye, Mum. We miss ye dearly. We promise we’ll write ye again when we get the money, but we can’t write often, because we want to save every penny to buy ye that ticket to bring ye over here with us. Oor jobs at the steel factory here don’t pay as much as we’d hoped, but it’s still better than what we were getting back home. And if this job doesn’t work out for us, there’s always something for two handy Scotsmen to do.

With love,

Alan and Ewan

- One of oor favorite pictures of Dad and his brothers at the Games

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